“Can you hear it, the crocodile’s jaw snapping?” his grandmother asked, her head rolling from side to side. Her frail hand grew slack as she fell into silent slumber. The boy pulled his hand out of her grasp and into his lap. The next morning she was dead, and Davi was alone.

His existence was the reason for the village’s avoidance of and contempt towards him. He had heard the story whispered enough. It began when his father, whose name was forbidden to say, had gone god hunting. The heathen disgraced his village and brought a nature god’s anger down upon them in the form of polluted smog, destructive winds, and terrible roars that brought the trees crumbling down. The father, nameless, stole a great weapon from the god embodied in crocodile flesh and used it for his personal greed. In bringing back forbidden power and belief, he doomed his wife during childbirth.

When Davi emerged from womb, that angry spirit branded him with a cursed mark and flew to the village center. Thrashing and hissing, the god yelled, “A plague on you all. Condemn the future with your past!” and then vanished, leaving ill omens and an unwanted boy. For years the village was one wave of fear and hate toward him and his only support, a grandmother. The boy never knew his parents—not even their names.

One morning, ten years later, Davi squatted on spongy soil with mud caked from his head down to his waist. Only his legs were free of the brown ooze, being wrapped in faded black, wool leggings. Sandals made from wood with snakeskin stretched around them covered his feet. The boy’s mouth and chin were smeared with blood-red juice from wild berries, moving fluidly across his skin as he searched the forest line for signs of life. He would have to be quick if anyone found him. An awful sneer widened his lips as he thought of how the elders would try
and punish him, once they realized he had stolen and destroyed most of the berries in storage. After shoving some onto his mouth and face, the rest he had smashed into the mud, rolling them between puddles and molding them into cakes of filth.

Davi fell back against the mud, wiggling into the cushion of the wetland around him. The bogs and semi-submerged forests surrounding the village territory acted as a second, private home. The only motivation the boy had for stealing from his own people was little more than the chance to be noticed and punished through recognition. Most of the men, women, and even other children of the community ignored his presence. His grandmother and a few village elders were the only souls he talked to, and those conversations revolved around his naughtiness.

A gathering of clouds moved high above, opaque and gray as they rushed across the sky. Beneath them, he frowned and wailed out loud. Even the fluffy nothingness ignored him.

His entire body flinched when an angry bellow answered his cry. Mud flew everywhere as he sat upright and spun around. The boy waited, frozen for several moments, thinking someone would burst through the trees. When no one approached, Davi moved hesitantly toward the noise. As he dodged around long-stemmed leaves and vines, the ten-year-old could make out several bodies fumbling around ahead of him. The loose-weave quilt of green underbrush provided brief flashes of flesh—soft and rough, thin and leathery. When he came to a window made from tree branches, Davi dropped to his knees and watched the scene with a bubble of excitement in his chest.

Near the river’s edge he spotted three men as they wrestled, grunting and struggling with some beast. They were honored warriors of the village, trying to keep a monstrous creature against the ground. Its long, flat body wrapped in dark green armor held spikes in organized rows from neck to tail tip. The reptile writhed and twisted as if the body was an earthquake shaking
the mountain range along its back. Davi recognized the creature they were fighting, a crocodile. His breathing sped as he watched, eager to see who would win this struggle. Crocodiles were revered as symbols of power and anger.

The ancient reptile was thrashing everywhere. Its scales and claws collided with the three men while they tried to tie and subdue it. The angry hissing issuing from its mouth made the watching boy quiver with a curious sensation. He was in the presence of greatness, hoping the crocodile would win. If it did, the reptile would reestablish the notion that nature ruled, and the animal gods could dictate all human lives.

The three men shouted orders to one another, but barely discernible in the noise caused by trying to maintain the creature. Water sprayed in a murky fountain when one warrior tripped over a scaly tail. The crocodile roared, but the men just roared back. Its long nose butted against the tall man’s thigh, and its clawed foot raked across another leather-wrapped leg before digging into the muddy shore. Neck muscles bulged with desperation while the animal’s entire form vibrated in spasms—the last reckless attempt at freedom.

The shortest of the three managed to loop a rope around the crocodile’s mouth and the other two straddled its back until the beast was immobile. Davi’s breath caught when it stopped struggling. Speaking quickly, they bound the creature, and the boy had to rush away. He knew what they had planned for it.

Walking further into the forest, he pondered the recent battle. Those warriors were strong to bring down the crocodile, and yet he knew they had only captured a mindless beast. It was not a god, only a member of the lesser generation. The true crocodile spirit could have easily won and cursed the three men to their death.
He did not travel much farther than his mud-and-berries disposal site before they caught him. A withered and gnarled arm, like an old tree branch, snaked around the boy’s and yanked him to his feet. Two more figures came up behind the first, their legs and arms bound in wool material like his.

“Davi. So this is where you have been, and you’ve taken the food as well!” the elder shrieked. She was no more than forty or fifty years old but the cursed weather had aged her well beyond that. The village leader and his grandmother stood behind her. The boy dropped his head as if ashamed, but his expression was unrepentant; his red-stained lips curved the tiniest bit upward at their corners.

“You will pay for this! Shoren, do you not see he has fouled our storage, cost us more than he is worth?” the woman ranted, shaking Davi’s arm and exhaling her rotten cheese and vinegar breath on him. He did not care what this old witch thought, but then his grandmother shook her head and refused to look at him. The childish face melted and his lips fell slack.

“Bring him back, and I will decide his punishment,” Shoren said. He was the oldest man of the village, so it made sense that he would be the leader. Not as withered as the old woman, but he held deep wrinkles and scars across his thin frame. With wild black hair and sharp eyes on his square face, the leader demanded respect. He’d had previous years to practice straightening his body and refining his strong voice for the role.

The elder woman—the boy had no desire to know her true name—threw Davi into his grandmother’s arms and she barely caught him. He noticed her arms trembled more often than not, and his weight against them was almost too much to support. The leader led their small party back towards the village, his grandmother now leaning on Davi. She was a caring but sickly woman with long, braided honey-brown hair. Her skin was tanned like his from being out in the
sun and weather. Her once curved and round body was now wasted down to the bone. She was not starving, since Davi often gave her part of his own meals, but he knew she was sick. It made him burn inside, so he ran away and broke rules to gather attention. The boy’s resolve shattered if they made Sopai come out to retrieve him.

They returned home and Shoren told them to wait for his summon. His grandmother ushered him inside their home, the warm and dark dwelling with a thatched roof and mud wedged into cracks. The walls were barren on the inside, no decorations or hangings, and the enclosure smelled like bark touched with mist. Sopai kept a pile of loose yarn and dull-colored linens next to her sleeping pad for nighttime knitting. In the furthest right corner sat a large metal box that emitted an unusual hum. Whenever Davi examined the container, he would stick his hand in it and feel instant cold. His grandmother kept many types of food in that box, though only items that would last for a long time if frozen.

Sopai slapped the boy across his berry-smeared face when his body shifted toward the sleeping pad. He barely felt her strike, as feeble as the hand was. But it stung deep in his heart, and his eyes prickled with wetness. Mouth contorting into an unnatural shape, Davi whimpered until Sopai wrapped her fragile arms around him.

“You must stop this foolishness, for your own good,” she whispered, digging her nails into the boy’s shoulders. Her claw-like grip brought glimmers of past memories to his mind.

Shadows crowded around him, whispering in his ear, “Not safe…throw him, it, into the river…you see the scales sprouting from his stomach?” He felt a cold hand run across his infant body, poking and prodding with spiritual relics. Disembodied chanting flooded every silent moment; words meant to purge evil and seek forgiveness from an angered god.
Davi sat alone outside, only a few years later, pretending to play as he watched the other children chase each other past every village hut except his. If a curious soul came near Davi’s inviting smile, the parent would swoop down protectively and recoil like he was poisonous.

Another year Davi entered the village’s market to barter for food and fabrics. Every supplier either vanished at the sight of him or shooed him off with stern words and cleansing hand gestures. The boy did not understand any of it but never again entered the crowded market. Instead he stole from storage and developed pranks for fun.

The shadowed memories faded as Sopai’s hand dug deeper into the scarred mark on his right shoulder. The curse was shaped into a hook-like curve, resembling a claw or river bend. His entire life was plagued with hostility from the only community he knew, and horrific sounds that would frequently erupt throughout the forest and wetlands. The entire village insisted it was from Davi’s curse. When the noise finally dimmed for a short time, foul smells and wind blew into the village—exactly like a crocodile’s breath—to spread illness and ruin their livelihood.

His liquid brown eyes moved up to meet Sopai’s dry green ones and he saw she wanted to tell him more. He offered his hand and lead her over to the larger cot covered with wool blankets and woven sack pillows.

The old woman laid down carefully and her grandson tucked a brown and cream afghan blanket around her, decorated with circle patterns to represent unity and successful life. She whispered thanks before those dry eyes turned glassy and distant. Davi held his breath, waiting for her.

“When I was a young woman,” she finally began in a low voice, “I came to this village because it was my destiny, just as your destiny is to be hated by our people.”
Davi leaned against the bed, his hand clasping hers while her fingers twitched. He remembered briefly how another woman from the village called her Sophie sometimes, but she shushed the friend each time and ordered her grandson to go out on some chore.

The boy rubbed her palm, his vision swirling around the home’s dirt floors covered with baskets and simple tools. He lingered on the dusty, old black box with dozens of knobs and buttons, hidden poorly under a rag, that she would play music from. It was a secret treasure, one she had been firm with Davi to not let anyone else see.

“Your father was a misguided soul,” Sopai whispered, her eyes drifting closed. “He grew restless with our ways and sought a dangerous power. He did not steal from a god, but from something even more threatening to this village. He stole truth, and you suffer for him.” She murmured about being so tired. Her parting words paid tribute to the crocodile, and Davi realized she would never wake up. But she was wrong. He would become a better man than his father, and the village would recognize him as greatness, not a curse.

Shoren called for Davi the morning of his grandmother’s death. When the boy appeared before him, the leader said, “Your punishment has been carried out. Remember that for the future and resolve to mend your ways.” He was sent away, wondering if the leader had meant for Sopai to die.

On his way back to the hut, the terrible roar began again deep within the forest around their village. Smog would follow all too soon, and everyone Davi passed refused to look at him.

The tallest of the three crocodile wrestlers stopped him at a trading table near the center of their village. “Hello, cursed one. The leader has asked me to pay you respect,” he said, spitting on Davi. He laughed and turned his back to the boy.

“I have a name!” Davi screeched.
“Of course you do, but would you have the rest of us defile ourselves by speaking it?” he laughed again and walked away. The boy wanted to run up and bite him. Simultaneously he wanted to hug the warrior for acknowledging Davi at all. If only it could be that simple.

Village life continued as usual, with trading in the center square and movement of sheep from one enclosure to another. When the elders thought no one watched, Davi saw them crowded around brightly labeled crates filled with odd contraptions and packets. Somehow the boy suspected these items fell under the category of forbidden within their society.

Davi grew determined to set out to capture and control a crocodile, but not any ordinary beast like the one caught in the earlier fight. To honor Sopai, he would find the true god in flesh and harness its power, thereby becoming a man above men in his village. Power would overcome destiny.

The boy waited until nightfall and set out for his usual pranks, this time with a defined purpose. He stole netting, food, and tracking supplies from storehouses. He took extra clothing and woven sheets from home. Not much would fit into the travel bag he managed to find, but it would have to be enough. He did not care what anyone thought of his thievery; their opinion would immediately change once he brought back a reptilian nature god.

Davi journeyed with no destination in mind. But this didn’t concern him; the boy would wait for the challenge to come to him. He trusted his instincts as much as he trusted that fate would no longer rule his life. The surrounding land was quiet and the air clean; Davi assumed the angry spirit was napping with his jaws locked tight. All night he wandered deeper into the wetlands, applying the skills he gathered over years of exploits like unlocking animal gates and stealing other children’s possessions. His knowledge of tracking was minimal, but what he did know was credited to Sopai and he silently offered thanks to her. By early morning, Davi set up a
camp between low hanging branches and curled into the wool woven blanket he managed to carry in the sack.

He woke mid-afternoon to the startling sound of a massive tree cracking. It echoed through the forest, just beyond the marshland. Davi, tangled in his blanket, breathed slowly and strained to hear more. A low rumble built into a growl like no animal he had ever heard. The sound became an unending drone, but in the distance. While he gathered the nearby possessions, his heart jumped to his throat. If that was the angry god he would have to act now, so he moved through the wilderness toward it.

The daytime forest was surreal to Davi. So wrapped in the greens, browns, and grays of nature around him, the boy felt smaller with every step. He wondered if it was the trees could grow larger by the second; their long, smooth branches hung suspended hundreds of feet above. As the unearthly growl continued ahead of him, Davi crouched over and jogged through the undergrowth.

He reached a clearing and came to an abrupt stop, nearly falling over. The monstrous thing in front of him made his jaw go numb. It was at least four times his height and completely alien. The creature—if it could even be called that—sat on four stumpy legs bound under a black, circular belt. Its square back hunched over and connected with an extremely long neck. It was unbearably yellow, like the color he suspected would be stamped across his eyes after staring at the sun too long. He looked at it from his peripheral vision instead. The neck curled under to connect to the u-shaped, hollow bucket head with no eyes. The body was hard and smooth, with sharp edges as if carved by some godly knife or the edge of a lightning bolt.

Davi yelped when the growl erupted into a snarl, and he whipped around to see another one rolling in the distant field like a mutant lizard, snake-like in its movement. The forest ahead
was made of blooming tree rows; stumps where trees had once stood now squatted behind the
monster. The odd creations removed everything from the surrounding forest and piled the
wooden logs together at specific points.

He darted into the forest growth, desperate to escape notice. The growling one could be
aggressive, Davi decided, and ran awkwardly with the pack flopping against his back. The damp
soil turned soggier as he neared the river. After following it for awhile he came to an inlet pond.
Two shapes stood on the opposite side. Two people.

One was a tall man without skin. The other was a woman, shorter than the man but still
measuring higher than most women in the village. She was tanned like Davi, though not in the
same weathered way. The hue of her skin seemed to glow flawlessly, and she dressed in the
brightest colors: greener than the leaves, bluer than the sky, and a cascade of shades unknown to
the boy. The woman’s hair was berry red and bloody in the setting sunlight. Her male companion
was dressed in sharp black over his entire body with night-dark hair to match. They stared
beyond the thin tree line, and Davi still heard the roar of strange creatures. The sound grew even
louder from beyond where the pair stood.

He listened to their conversation spoken in his language, but the drifting words were
oddly accented and foreign. He strained to hear, even though his understanding was choppy.

“I get the impression they slacking down there,” the woman grumbled, picking dirt out of
her fingernail.

“Shit, Gale. If you want, get down there and give what they deserve,” the man grunted.
He rolled his shoulders and ran a palm across his thin hairline. “Hell knows you manage it.”

“You pigs get what you deserve. Haven’t forgotten good old days, have you?” the woman
Gale asked.
“Of course no, I bullied you and you came back with riddle and punch to the crotch. Must be why I like you—you conniving.” The tall, thin one clapped her shoulder.

She ignored the gesture and said, “Let’s go talk the boys.”

They moved beyond the tree line, and when Davi leaned out to see better he knocked a rock into the water. The man and woman spun around, scanning the pond. The one called Gale narrowed her brows and seemed to glare directly at Davi. He was prepared to run, kick, or bite if they came too close. Before he could act, however, the pond’s surface wavered and gurgled in front of him. Her gaze held the water as an enormous crocodile, larger than average, rose above the muddy surface. Its ancient, scaled back parted the murkiness while the rugged nose and filmy lids absorbed the darkening world.

Davi gasped for breath, recognizing the body of a nature god before him. It was power that skimmed the surface of the dirty river pool; its unending row of teeth sliced through the liquid boiling in its jaw. The tip of the reptile’s tail churned muck under the water, and in that moment Davi felt transported to the creature’s spirit. He could sense its movements, instincts, and animal emotion. He slipped with the crocodile into deeper water, delving into the snarl of the beast’s world.

The crocodile saw and smelled the world around him in rough, jagged tones. Like a crazed artist throwing paint across his canvas, the animal stormed through his world. Predatory claws ripped at the water, his monstrous eyes locked on the view of a woman barely past the shoreline. From beneath the surface, his gaze reflected the swirling haze of cloud-drenched sky, the low blue sound in the atmosphere. The life within the pond rippled and died abruptly as he approached the woman. Every other living organism was driven away from the human, as though her blood red hair represented death. Davi felt when the crocodile breached the water, and wet
droplets on his back sounded like sighing moss as they fell. His jaw unhinged, the sound of his teeth like scraped rust. Hunger radiated from slit pupils when the animal lunged at the woman, as if driven by the music of instinct.

She spun towards the powerful beast and drew out a double cylinder weapon like the crack of a whip. It was made of two shining, grey pipes and a wider handle made from polished, dark wood. The faint scent of metal erupted around the scene as her device burst with harsh sound. The beast froze in mid-leap, his flat back exploding with wine-colored red. He hit the dirt ground like the lowest note on a piano, and the last angry, brown and yellow breath rushed out. The woman smiled maliciously at the body before her as the cylindrical object in her hand flipped back into its holster with a flash of steel grey and deep brown.

Davi collapsed on the tough dirt, gaping at that woman. She had killed the object of his journey with little effort or thought. A nature god in flesh, and it was gone—power stolen by this strange red-haired woman. Davi’s body quivered a moment until he burst into a fit of quiet laughter, his lips taut like a bowstring. That woman was the true answer.

He leaped to his feet and ran through the damp brush around the murky pond, moving like a jungle cat as he stalked the two strangers moving away from the crocodile. Davi paused at the carcass seeping bright red to swirl into the dark brown water, and his grandmother’s voice whispered, “A great, dangerous weapon.”

Gale and her partner reached the cleared field and Davi gasped as he saw nearly a dozen unnaturally yellow creations, almost identical to the one he witnessed before. It was a herd of them, and in each hollowed back sat a man, some brown toned like Davi and some skinless whites. The men commanded these creatures like Gale commanded her god-killing arm.
Davi paced around the site’s boundary, absorbing the way each person waved to Gale or whined in protest of her barked orders. He was enthralled when he saw a black box—just like Sopai’s secret music player—latched onto the yellow contraptions while the men fidgeted with knobs and levers. Each creature-thing moved to a new section of trees to cut, grind, and roar. Dark puffs of smog and smoke blasted from them and spiraled into the sky like polluted breath.

Gale lifted her cylindered object above her head and looked down as if in prayer. Davi watched, transfixed, and understood the truth in her palm. That was her great weapon, the one his father stole on a god-hunt. The village hid from this power driven world, cowering before truth and punishing with ignorance. The elders blamed an angry god instead of those with knowledge that surpassed the village beliefs. Davi would change them. He would bring back the weapon of power and show all of their ugly reflections in its gleaming metal sides.

He jumped out of the trees and sprinted towards the woman Gale. Shouts bubbled around him, but only the sharp explosion of her weapon made Davi stop, no more than a few feet away. The raised arm dropped to her side, and a booted foot lifted onto the fresh cut stump. She leaned closer to him as the black-coated, white-bone man appeared at her side. He snickered at the boy and said, “Must be one of those backwater products of inbreeding. You speak, boy?”

Gale said nothing, only watched him and ground her heel into the smooth wood. Davi divided his attention between her face and her foot before he whispered, asking for her power and his manhood. The woman cocked her head, that deep red hair—almost brown in the growing darkness—fluttering to one side. She pulled the weapon out of its holster again, a trace of oil lingering in the air, and pointed it at the boy.

“Is this what you want?” she asked quietly. Her eyes burned like fire, and Davi felt a similar burn deep in his chest. He was paralyzed, held in her trance, but still reached out a single
palm towards her. One finger pulled a notch on her weapon until it made a sharp click. He stared into the loaded, double barrels of power.